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U.S. STAFF IN LAOS PUT AT ABOUT 1,000

Official Total Given as 830,
but Military Group Is Said
to Exceed Stated Figure

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 23 — The State Department said today that about 830 Americans were serving in Laos in United States Government positions or in positions under government contract. Other informed officials asserted, however, that the number was about 1,000, most of the difference being military men.

The United States involvement became an issue here last week after reports from Vientiane indicated that American planes were actively supporting Royal Laotian troops in combat against North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces in Laos.

Congressional hearings into the American role in Laos are scheduled to begin Oct. 14. Congressional sources who say they are informed on the ques-

tion indicated that they would withhold their information until the hearings.

The activities of United States military and paramilitary men in Laos remained clouded by official secrecy except for a hint that Americans were flying helicopters to transport Laotian troops and guerrillas into combat.

Government officials continued to insist that no American combat troops were in Laos, but they declined to define the term. Asked whether American military men were involved in combat operations as planners, advisers or observers, a State Department spokesman said his impression was they were not.

With 70,000 regular Laotian troops and about 15,000 guerrillas, that means one American for about every 200 Lao-

tians. In contrast, the United States advisory mission in South Korea numbers about 1,000 for a 600,000-man military force. Not including the 50,000 Koreans fighting in Vietnam, that means one American for about 550 Koreans.

The Laotian forces, State Department officials said, are conducting a two-pronged offensive, one north of Vientiane in the Plaine des Jarres and the other eastward along Route 9 toward the border of North Vietnam in central Laos.

The State Department spokesman, Carl Bartch, reported that approximately 500 United States Government employees were assigned to the embassy

in Laos. The figure, which he refused to break down, includes diplomats, administrative staff, those in the aid mission, information officers and military personnel.

The Foreign Service list for May, the latest available, shows about 325 persons assigned to the embassy, including about 10 military attachés. The remaining 175 are believed to be military men in the military-assistance group attached to the embassy.

The informed officials, quoting a confidential report, said the number of military men was nearly 400.

Mr. Bartch said that the figures given him included only those permanently assigned to Laos, leaving open the possibility that the discrepancy involved men temporarily posted from other countries, such as Thailand. He added that he had been assured that the overall figure of 500 was nearly accurate.

The 1962 Geneva agreements on the independence and neutralization of Laos specified that "the introduction of foreign regular and irregular troops, foreign paramilitary formations and foreign military personnel into Laos is prohibited."

The North Vietnamese have long since violated those terms, as State Department officials have pointed out. Mr. Bartch said that the United States would not quarrel with the figure of 60,000 North Vietnamese in Laos recently used by the Laotian Premier Prince Souvanna Phouma. The Premier, speaking at a news conference yesterday, denied that the

United States was playing a combat role.

In addition to the Americans assigned to the embassy, Mr. Bartch said 330 were there under contract to the aid mission. Included, he said, are those working for Air America, Continental Air Services and the International Voluntary Service.

Air America and Continental Air Services are widely regarded as operations run by the United States Central Intelligence Agency. The International Voluntary Service performs functions similar to those of the Peace Corps.

The guarded statements of American officials about the United States involvement is vividly reminiscent of statements made in connection with Vietnam before the deep involvement of American forces there. At that time officials denied that American advisers were participating in combat operations, then conceded that advisers were going into the field with South Vietnamese troops and finally acknowledged that American air and transport support was being provided.

United States officials maintain that North Vietnamese troops have taken over most of the Communist military effort from the Pathet Lao, which is estimated to number 30,000.

On the Government side, the forces are tribesmen who are guerrillas and regular troops operating like guerrillas. During the current rainy season they cannot rely on the road system. Official sources here said that some of their movements were by helicopter.

BALTIMORE SUN

24 SEP 1969

U.S. Says It Maintains 500 Personnel In Laos

Washington, Sept. 23 (Reuters)—The State Department said today there are only about 500 United States government personnel—including a handful of military men—now stationed in Laos.

It announced the figure in an effort to offset criticism in Congress following fresh reports last week that the U.S. was getting involved in another war in Laos, which borders on South Vietnam.

Inquiry Set

A Senate foreign relations subcommittee plans to conduct an inquiry into the extent of U.S. operations in Laos.

Carl Bartch, a State Department spokesman, insisted at a news conference today that, although American military supplies are going to Royal Lao government forces, there are no U.S. combat troops in that country.

However, the State Department has previously acknowledged that U.S. aircraft based in nearby Thailand fly reconnaissance missions for the Royal Lao government.

The reconnaissance planes are accompanied by armed fighter escorts with authority to fire back if fired upon.

The military situation in Laos, Mr. Bartch said, currently involves two drives by govern-

ment troops against North Vietnamese forces and other pro-Communist elements in the country.

Mr. Bartch cited Laotian government estimates that there are up to 60,000 North Vietnamese troops illegally in Laos in contravention of the 1962 Geneva Accords designed to preserve Laotian neutrality and independence.

Mr. Bartch, under intensive questioning, agreed that the figure of 500 U.S. government personnel he mentioned applied to people actually stationed in Laos and would not cover any who might be there on temporary duty. However, he did not actually admit that there were Americans there on temporary duty.

The spokesman declined to comment when asked if the CIA had men in Laos.

Mr. Bartch said the figure of 500 covered American diplomats, Agency for International Development workers, and military personnel who belonged to staffs of the service attaches at the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane.

As well as those government personnel, he said, there were about 330 U.S. AID contract employees in Laos, including those working for two organizations he identified as Air American and Continental Air Services.